Killing by White Policeman Angers Blacks in Arkansas

By JON NORDHEIMER
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STAR CITY, Ark., June 11—Like millions of his fellow Americans, Carnell Russ was behind the wheel of his family car on Memorial Day. A total of 557 accident victims died that weekend on the nation's highways. Carnell Russ died, too, but his death was no ordinary highway statistic.

Mr. Russ, a 24-year-old black mill worker, was driving his wife and children home to Monticello, Ark., after spending the holiday weekend at the home of his in-laws. Shortly after 6 P.M. he was stopped by a state patrol car on Highway 81 about 25 miles north of Monticello and was arrested for speeding.

About an hour later, in the rear of the faded yellow-brick Lincoln County Courthouse in Star City, a drowsy community in southeastern Arkansas, he was shot and killed by a city policeman.

The shooting aroused the ire of the black community in the state, and black leaders were not placated when a grand jury in Lincoln County last week indicted the city policeman, Charles Ratliff, on a charge of voluntary manslaughter.

Local whites speculated that the death resulted from shoddy police work and noted that Officer Ratliff was a former Mississippi cafe owner before becoming Star City's only law enforcement officer four months ago.

Blacks in the state, however, have attributed the death to a dual standard of justice that influences the daily existence of both races in rural communities like this one.

Dr. Jerry Jewell, a black dentist in Little Rock who is president of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said of his death:

"Whites just can't bring themselves to face the routine injustices heaped on blacks. But the blacks are beginning to get some education for the first time and some of them are beginning to ask the whites questions. I think the reason why Carnell Russ is dead is because he asked 'why?'"

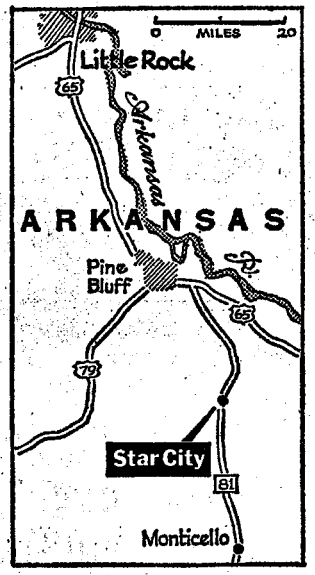
Says Russ Attacked

Officer Ratliff told investigators he shot Mr. Russ when the black attacked him "for no reason." He said he struck the traffic offender on the head with his service revolver to subdue him and the blow discharged the weapon.

Prosecuting Attorney Joe Holmes of Pine Bluff refused to release the testimony of other witnesses appearing before the grand jury, but he said that evidence obtained from an autopsy on the victim did not support the officer's version.

Officer Ratliff and other law officials here declined to discuss the matter while charges are pending.

Mr. Russ's widow, Clementine, 27 years old, said in an interview that when her husband was stopped by the state trooper he was instructed to follow the police car to Star City where he would have to post a bond on the traffic violation. At the courthouse they were met by Officer Ratliff and Norman Draper, 30 years old, who was to begin work the next day as the town's second police officer.



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The three men took Mr. Russ around the rear of the courthouse to the jail. Mrs. Russ said. She remained in the car with six of her nine children and D. H. Lambert, a friend who was traveling with the family.

$25 Paid for Fine

"About 20 minutes later Carnell came out and asked me how much money I had," said the soft-spoken Mrs. Russ. "He said they wanted $23 for the fine."

She handed him $25 and he went back inside. When he did not return after 10 minutes, she said she blew the car's horn. "The children were hot and hungry and I wanted to get them home," she explained.

A few minutes after she sounded the horn the state trooper emerged from the building, got in his car, and drove to a corner intersection down the street from where the Russ car was parked, she said. Shortly, another state police car arrived and the two troopers carried on a lively conversation, she added.

Later, perhaps five more minutes, she said she saw Officer Ratliff walk from the courthouse and climb in his car, and drive it around to the rear of the building. She noticed that he no longer was wearing his holster and pistol.

Ten more minutes passed. An ambulance pulled around the corner from the rear of the courthouse and, with a short burst from its siren, dashed down the highway in the direction of Pine Bluff.

"Both polices got in their cars and followed the ambulance," said Mrs. Russ. "Deedee [Mr. Lambert] said it looked like Carnell in the ambulance, but I said no, I seen a white man sitting inside and I reckoned it must've been a sick white man inside."

More time passed and Mr. Lambert got out of the car and walked around the back of the courthouse. The jail door was locked. He looked inside. Nobody was there. He went back to the car and they sat there, nervous and alarmed.

Later, the state trooper returned and summoned Mr. Lambert out of the car and talked to him in hushed whispers. When Mr. Lambert returned to the car, shaken, he told Mrs. Russ: "He said Carnell had been killed. He said it was an accident and Carnell was dead."

Mrs. Russ walked over to the trooper. "He told me try not to get upset. I asked him what happened. He said Carnell had said some smart word to the policeman and the policeman hit him over the head with the gun and the gun went off."

Turner Russ, the dead man's father, sat in his parlor and said:

"Carnell was a man who worked every day with his own muscles. At nights he worked at the Burlington carpet mill as a machine operator, and during the day he worked mechanical work for people. Probably one of the reasons he was in a hurry to get home was because he had to be at the mill at 10 o'clock that night. That man worked hard to feed nine children."

George Howard the N.A.A.C.P. lawyer in Pine Bluff, said he thought the indictment of voluntary manslaughter against Officer Ratliff was lenient. The charge carries a prison sentence of two to seven years upon conviction. His organization, Mr. Howard said, may challenge in Federal Court the composition of the grand jury, a 16-man panel that had two aged blacks sitting on it. The racial balance of Lincoln County is 50-50, he said.

The grand jury was shown the blood-spattered $25, but no receipt for the money was found. It was not among the possessions the hospital in Pine Bluff later mailed to the widow: 35 cents in change, the car keys, and a $45 bill for ambulance service.